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ABSTRACT

The functional role of a national center for vocational education depends on the people doing the work; consequently, the center sets its own agenda when it makes personal decisions. A center's role should include two elements: in setting its own research agenda, a center should take a broad perspective on vocational education; and a center should do more than talk or write about problems--it should solve them. A national center has the capacity to take a broad perspective and develop practical solutions. Three obstacles could eventually limit a center's achievement: (1) unrealistic expectations may prevent a center from delivering what it promises; (2) conflicting expectations of individual staff members can occur; and (3) the center may be exposed to conflicting external expectations. The best solution to the three obstacles is a high quality staff. The center needs staff members with diverse backgrounds, who are able to mediate conflicting expectations, diagnose problems, and generate feasible solutions. (NLA)

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The Research Role of a National Center

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We were asked to distinguish between the vocational education research roles of the federal government, a national center, and a research university. The same general goals are shared by all these institutions. Each seeks to achieve an economically productive society in which the quality of work life enhances the personal fulfillment of the worker. But each institution may have a different role in achieving these goals. My talk is about the role of a national center.

Ultimately the role of any institution is inherent in the interests, abilities and values of its personnel. If the personnel have a service orientation and believe they have answers to the questions of educational reform and wish to convey those answers to people in the field, the center will have one agenda. If the personnel have a pure research orientation and wish to challenge assumptions, examine all sides to every question, the center will have a different agenda. If the center contains both types of people the agenda will depend on the relative status of each group. The functional role of a center depends on the people doing the work, regardless of the formal mission statements that delineate the role of the institution. Consequently, the center sets its own agenda when it makes personnel decisions. There will always be some overlap in the functions of institutions that draw from the same talent pool, even if they are expected to play separate roles.

Although I expect the center to set its own agenda, I have two suggestions for its role that may be obvious, but I believe need to be stated.

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My first recommendation is that in setting its own research agenda, a center should take a broad perspective on vocational education. In the broad view, voc ed is more than job training; it is education. And education is more than schooling; it is learning. Learning takes place in the total community and throughout the life span of an individual. Most of the personal attributes we are trying to develop to improve economic productivity, such as responsibility, cooperativeness, and flexibility, are heavily influenced by the home, the school, and the workplace. These attributes are formed by the incentives people are exposed to, by the type of role models that are available, and by the way people are treated.

If a center adopts this broad perspective it will also have to broaden its audience. It must communicate with managers, workers and policy makers from a wide variety of institutions that extend beyond the present boundaries of the vocational education community.

With a broad view, a national center would diagnose existing productivity problems and determine which ones are amenable to school solutions, and which ones require political, or economic interventions. For example, the shortage of worker skills may not be as significant a factor in economic productivity right now as the shortage of good management and good jobs. Hoachlander, Kaufman and Wilen (1991) in a recent NCRVE report on education and the economy, warned that there are limits on the capacity of education to strengthen the economy. They urged researchers to guard against expectations that are unrealistically high and against ill-conceived investments in schooling. It is a mistake for researchers to promise the

economic benefits of genuine social and economic reform from small investments in school interventions. The promised results will not be realized, which will lead to public disenchantment and loss of faith in the research enterprise.

In most problem areas, both school and societal interventions may be necessary. For example, worker productivity depends on technical skills, which is a school issue. But productivity may also depend on workers' perceptions of the dignity or public image of their occupation, which is a societal issue. Therefore, in the broad view, a center would not only conduct research that enhances the practice of skill development. It would also engage in research that examines the relationship between such variables as the dignity of work and worker productivity.

Gordon Swanson gave a passionate description of the dignity problem at a recent German/American symposium on voc ed. He said, that the "hope of recapturing any measure of superiority through national achievement is not very high, unless and until some dignity in work is restored." I think he is right. If people look down on my work, why should I care about doing a good job?

My second recommendation is that a center should do more than talk and write about the problems of vocational education. It should do something to solve them. We already have impressive evidence, some of it provided by NCRVE, supporting a variety of desirable educational practices. For example, cooperative education, apprenticeships, school-based enterprises, the integration of academic and vocational education, and

business-school partnerships. But a center must go beyond this level of knowledge, and try to find out why there is so much resistance to implementing these desirable practices. What vested interests are challenged by these practices and how can they be overcome?

A few weeks ago I reviewed a research report for NCRVE that described the declining status of voc ed at five comprehensive high schools. The study makes a sound contribution to the research literature. I wish however, that in the future, the center will go beyond describing the problems, to analyze their underlying causes, and try to solve them. For example, I would like to see NCRVE, with all its resources, actually work with the teachers and administrators in those five high schools for an extended period of time. They could help them experiment with different approaches, and try to solve the problems that were observed in those schools. They could develop an operational model that might demonstrate for policy makers the value of high school voc ed. It could also help people in other schools to achieve similar outcomes.

In short, I believe a national center has the capacity to take a broad perspective and develop practical solutions. But, I foresee three obstacles that could eventually limit a center's achievement.

The first obstacle is that unrealistic expectations may prevent a center from delivering what it promises. It has been my experience that the competitive grant system rewards the most impressive proposals, and often encourages contestants to promise more than they can deliver. But such commitments place harmful stress on staff members, especially on those

who are most conscientious about the quality of their work. In the long run, this can cause a center to lose its best employees, which may contribute to the center's decline. Funding agencies can avoid this problem by carefully checking the feasibility of their proposals.

The second obstacle is that conflicting expectations of individual staff members can occur. Staff members may be exposed to competing expectations from the center and from their university. The university rewards individual research publication. A mission-oriented research center undertakes larger, applied programs that are likely to produce fewer individual publications. If the same people wear both hats, their loyalty to one of the institutions may be sacrificed in favor of the other.

If the "publish or perish" system prevails, the center may gradually assume the "paper-mill" character of the university. Programs may become more specialized, and fragmented. They would lose their coherence. The center could eventually be reduced to a funding agency for small individual project grants in response to unsolicited proposals from member universities in the network. If this happens the center would sacrifice any chance it might have had to become a major influence in changing vocational education.

However, if the programmatic mission-oriented structure of the center prevails, the center may provide a growing opportunity for people to work together as a team to achieve a common goal. The center could become a very desirable place for the development of close personal connections among staff members from many different disciplines. Thus, the center has the potential for restoring the collegiality that has all but disappeared from

the modern research university. This alternative would require universities to seriously alter their promotion criteria.

The third obstacle is that the center may be exposed to conflicting expectations. The federal government is more likely to expect the center to be part of a centralized system with a clear chain of command. The universities in the network are more likely to expect the center to be part of a decentralized system. These are conflicting models.

The centralized model assumes strong fiscal management from above is needed to hold the center accountable for the expenditure of public funds for a prescribed scope of work, consistent with the legislative intent. The centralized model seeks practical solutions to some high priority problems. A national center is necessary to coordinate such an effort. For example, the NASA moon shot was accomplished by a systematic mission-oriented program that identified specific objectives and focused resources on those objectives until the mission was accomplished.

In contrast, the decentralized model assumes that each region, or each university, should have its own research center. Universities prefer to set their own local agendas and garner full credit for their work.

Most university researchers I talk to are advocates of the decentralized model. They feel that, with our present state of knowledge, it may be unreasonable to expect the complex problems of education and work to be "solved," in the way NASA achieved its moon shot. They feel that at this early stage we simply don't have enough answers. They believe the greatest

contributions can be made through basic research. They feel that it is very important to develop research capacity, to train a new kind of researcher who is able to observe outstanding educational craftsmen in their natural settings. Such researchers could describe what they see in a way that helps other school practitioners to achieve similar outcomes.

I think there will always be some tension between centralization pressures from the government, and decentralization pressures from the universities. The center is caught in between, and has to strive for some balance between the two poles. With adequate funding these models may not be mutually exclusive. A center could do basic and mission-oriented research and have the benefits of both.

In conclusion, as I suggested at the beginning of this talk, the best solution to the three obstacles of unrealistic or conflicting expectations is a quality staff. The center needs staff members with diverse backgrounds, who are able to mediate conflicting expectations, diagnose problems and generate feasible solutions. With such people, a national center could eventually acquire a reputation for solving the problems of vocational education, and making sound proposals for its reform.